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WELCOME

At The Gathering Church, we take our responsibility to care for children and youth very seriously. These guidelines are intended to facilitate a safe and nurturing environment in which youth can grow in relationship with Jesus Christ.

The pages of this handbook provide a general overview of procedures and guidelines for volunteers and staff members providing services to youth from 6th through 12th grades at The Gathering Church. Our policies are intended to create a safe environment for children and students, protecting students, you, and the mission of The Gathering Church. Any additional or specific instructions will be provided before events and be made in accordance with this document.

After you have carefully read these policies, please sign and return the agreement form located on the last page. If you have questions, please contact the family pastor or associate pastor.

Thank you for serving, loving, and protecting our students.

Sincerely,

Mikah Alge

The Gathering Church Youth Safety System

Because we desire to protect students involved in our ministries, all volunteers and staff members must complete The Gathering Church's screening process, which includes a background check. All volunteers must be approved by the family minister and lead or associate pastor to serve.

STEP ONE: SEXUAL ABUSE AWARENESS TRAINING

All staff members and volunteers should have a basic understanding of the characteristics of sexual abusers and their behaviors in “grooming” a child for sexual abuse. Grooming is the process used by an abuser to select a child, win the child’s trust (and the trust of the child’s parent or ‘gatekeeper’), manipulate the child into sexual activity and keep the child from disclosing the abuse.

To equip you with information necessary to recognize abuser characteristics and grooming behaviors, The Gathering Church requires all staff members and volunteers to complete MinistrySafe’s Sexual Abuse Awareness Training (live or online at www.MinistrySafe.com). This training will be renewed every two years. This can be done online from home or at one of our annual churchwide training days.

STEP TWO: SCREENING PROCESS

Staff members and volunteers serving with children are required to complete the The Gathering Church Screening Process, which includes:

- Employment Application (employees only);
- Safety Application
- Interview
- Reference Checks

A volunteer must attend The Gathering Church services for six months before being eligible to serve in positions providing ministry services to children.

STEP THREE: POLICIES & PROCEDURES

Please review these policies and sign the last page indicating that you have read and understood the material, and agree to comply with our policy requirements.

STEP FOUR: CRIMINAL BACKGROUND CHECK

All staff members and volunteers working with children must undergo a criminal background check. Depending upon the ministry position, differing levels or intensity of criminal background check may be required. Individuals who have committed sexually-oriented or sex-related crimes may not serve in any area providing services to children or minors. In addition, certain other past criminal acts *may* preclude an applicant from serving minors.

CHILD PROTECTION

The Gathering Church supports and maintains a **zero tolerance** policy concerning child abuse and neglect. It is a violation of Texas law for any volunteer or staff member to physically, sexually, or emotionally abuse or neglect any child participating in The Gathering Church programs.

ENFORCEMENT OF POLICIES

The Gathering Church maintains the highest standards in order to protect both the volunteers and students in our ministry. Anyone working with children or students at The Gathering Church is subject to the supervision and evaluation of the stewardship committee and must follow these guidelines. Staff members and volunteers in supervisory positions must diligently enforce all policies.

The Gathering Church staff reserves the right to dismiss volunteers who fail to follow the policies and guidelines.

CONSEQUENCES OF VIOLATION

Any person accused of committing any act considered by the church to be harmful to a youth will be immediately suspended from participation in ministry to youth and children. This suspension will continue during any investigation by law enforcement, Child Protective agencies or the Church.

Any person found to have violated this policy may be prohibited from *future* participation in all activities and programming involving minors. If the person is an employee, such conduct may result in termination of employment.

Failure to report a policy violation is grounds for termination of an employee. Volunteers who fail to report a policy violation may be restricted from participation in any future activities involving minors at The Gathering Church.

Staff members and volunteer leaders should immediately discuss with their supervisor any inappropriate action or breach of this policy and seek counsel from the church leadership and an attorney, if needed.

Note: In the state of Texas, all adults are mandatory reporters.

REPORTING ABUSE OR SUSPICIONS OF ABUSE

REPORTING SUSPICIOUS OR INAPPROPRIATE BEHAVIORS

The Gathering Church is committed to protecting the students in this ministry from any form of abuse. The Gathering Church has a Zero-Tolerance Policy that prohibits any act of sexual, emotional, or physical abuse. This zero-tolerance policy requires all The Gathering Church employees and volunteer leaders (those who work directly with students) to immediately report any occurrence (or suspected occurrence) of child abuse to a member of our staff. To this end, any report of inappropriate behaviors or suspicions of abuse or neglect will be taken seriously and will be reported, in accordance with this policy and state law, to Child Protective Services or criminal law enforcement.

Because sexual abusers ‘groom’ children for abuse, it is possible that a staff member or volunteer may witness behavior intended to groom a child for sexual abuse. Please report ‘grooming’ behavior, policy violations, or any suspicious behaviors to an immediate supervisor, such that the church may take appropriate action to safeguard children in the program.

REPORTING ALLEGATIONS OR SUSPICIONS OF ABUSE TO LAW ENFORCEMENT

We report all suspected or alleged abuse or neglect of children to the Texas CPS Emergency Response Hotline:

1-800-252-5400

Because many adults are unfamiliar with Texas reporting requirements and may be fearful of the process, The Gathering Church utilizes a ‘tandem or dual report’ model, where permitted. A ‘dual report’ occurs when a The Gathering Church supervisor reports the suspicion or allegation *together* with the individual who saw, heard or received information causing him or her to suspect abuse or neglect.

THIS PRACTICE IS NOT REQUIRED, OR INTENDED TO INHIBIT ANY STAFF MEMBER OR VOLUNTEER FROM REPORTING TO LAW ENFORCEMENT OR CPS *DIRECTLY*. Instead, it is meant to facilitate reporting, protect children and support individuals who may not feel able or willing to report alone.

NO PERMISSION IS NEEDED from The Gathering Church before reporting to law enforcement personnel or the Child Abuse Hotline. In addition, a report may be made without involving or informing The Gathering Church personnel.

While not required by state law, please report all suspicions of child abuse or neglect (or any inappropriate or 'grooming' behaviors of a colleague or coworker) to an immediate supervisor or a member of the The Gathering Church Safety Committee. This request is intended to assist the church in properly protecting children involved in The Gathering Church programs.

When in doubt, report.

Note: In the state of Texas all adults are mandatory reporters.

BUILDING SAFETY

Every ministry supervisor is responsible for ensuring that the ministry program area is monitored during youth programming. No youth will ever be left unattended in a ministry area during regular programming, class or activity. All students should be easily observable during regular programming, class or activity.

SUPERVISION

Only screened ministry volunteers, church staff members, and students are allowed in areas where ministry to students is occurring. All other adults should be asked for identification and immediately escorted out of the area. If questions or concerns arise related to any person in the area, a ministry supervisor or security team member should be notified immediately.

Two trained, screened, and unrelated adults should supervise students at all times.

Avoid being alone with an individual youth in any room or during any ministry program. If one supervising adult must leave a group of students, another volunteer or employee must be notified so that the *Two Adult Rule* can be followed.

If two individuals serving in a room are related to one another, a third unrelated volunteer or staff member must be present.

If an unusual circumstance occurs and you find yourself alone with a single student, move to a room or building occupied by others, or to a location easily observed by others. (Example: if a middle school youth is the last in a class to be picked up by a parent, move to an adjoining room where other staff members or volunteers are present.)

If you need to talk with a youth alone, do it in the hallway or a highly visible area, or have another leader with you. After every ministry event, ensure that every room, area and restroom is checked prior to leaving.

Avoid distractions that would impact your ability to effectively supervise students and maintain situational awareness (i.e., use of cell phones, wearing headphones).

SECURITY

After every ministry programming event, ensure that every room, area and restroom is checked prior to leaving.

STAFF MEMBER / VOLUNTEER TO youth RATIO

The Gathering Church is committed to providing appropriate supervision in all ministry programs. Accordingly, the following worker-to-youth **minimum ratios** will be observed:

1 - 10 students	at least 2 staff members or volunteers (2 adult rule)
11 - 29 students	at least 3 staff members or volunteers
30+ students	at least 4 staff members or volunteers

The Gathering Church practices the “Two Adult Rule” which requires a reasonable number of adult leaders (minimum of two) to be maintained when supervising students. A married couple or two family members would only account for “one” in this “Two Adult Rule”.

COMMUNICATING WITH FAMILIES

Parents have an open invitation to observe all programs and activities in which their youth is involved. However, parents who desire to participate in or have continuous, ongoing contact with their student’s program will be required to complete the The Gathering Church volunteer application and screening process.

Parental Contact

Parents will be contacted if a youth becomes ill, injured, or has a severe disciplinary problem while participating in ministry programs.

DISCIPLINE

No physical discipline may be used for behavior management of students, including spanking, slapping, pinching, hitting, biting or any other physical force as retaliation or correction for inappropriate behaviors.

In the event of a fight or physical altercation, verbally redirect those involved and avoid physical intervention unless necessary for the safety of *other* students. In these instances, staff members and leaders are allowed to restrain a youth with appropriate physical force, as needed. Uncontrollable or unusual behavior should be reported immediately to parents and to the family pastor and the lead or associate pastor. Any behavior problems will be handled in the following sequence:

1. The youth will be asked to correct the behavior.
2. A staff member will talk with the youth to discuss the problem behavior.
3. Parents will be notified of discipline or behavior problems.
4. The youth will not be allowed to attend a ministry event. (This is a final measure, but not desired.)

If a youth is unruly or fails to comply with verbal warnings or instructions, that youth will be asked to leave (if not endangered by doing so) or the student's parent will be contacted to pick up the student. Any damage of property will be reported to parents, who will be responsible for repairs, including damage incurred at off-campus ministry events.

BULLYING

Verbal, physical or emotional bullying is not acceptable in The Gathering Church ministry programs. Bullying is defined as an ongoing and deliberate misuse of power in relationships through repeated verbal, physical and/or social behavior that intends to cause physical, social and/or psychological harm. It can involve an individual or a group misusing their power, or perceived power, over one or more persons who feel unable to stop it from happening. ([NCAB](#))

At the first sign of bullying in any form, act decisively, and inform your ministry supervisor. There is no "harmless put-down" where bullying is concerned.

1. *First Offense*: Issue a warning to the youth and a general reminder to the group that this kind of interaction is inappropriate. Try not to embarrass or chastise.
2. *Second Offense*: Pull the offending student(s) from the group (in a seen or supervised location) and discuss the inappropriate interaction or behavior. Set clear parameters and behavioral goals. Let the youth know that the next step is communication with a pastor and the student's parents. Notify an immediate supervisor of ANY signs of bullying or verbal abuse.
 - a. Privately, but with another adult present, confirm that a youth who was the target of the bullying behaviors is not in danger of continued harassment

and is physically and emotionally stable. DO NOT SINGLE A youth OUT IN FRONT OF THE GROUP: be discreet.

3. *Third Offense*: Send the youth to a pastor for a phone call to his or her parents and possible removal from the trip, camp or event.

RESTROOM POLICIES

Be aware if a youth repeatedly leaves to use the restroom and stays there for unusual periods of time. Report this behavior to a supervisor. In public contexts, send students to use the restroom in groups of at least three, when possible.

EMPLOYEE / VOLUNTEER POLICIES

TOBACCO USE

Please abstain from the use or possession of tobacco products in church facilities, while in the presence of students or their parents, or during The Gathering Church ministry activities or programs, whether on campus or away. The Gathering Church is a tobacco-free facility.

INTOXICANTS

Staff members and volunteers are prohibited from the use, possession, or being under the influence of alcohol or any illegal drug while in any church facility, while traveling with students, or while working with or supervising minors during any The Gathering Church program or activity.

NUDITY

Never be nude in the presence of students in ministry programs. In the event a situation arises that may call for or contemplate the possibility of nudity (i.e. changing clothes during a pool party, weekend or overnight retreat, etc.), the staff member or volunteer leading the event will submit a plan to the ministry supervisor concerning arrangements for showering or changing clothes.

PHYSICAL APPEARANCE

Please dress in modest, comfortable attire. Please do not wear thin-strapped shirts or low cut shirts while you are serving. First impressions are important; please take this into consideration when you are serving.

- No revealing swimsuits
- No revealing / form-fitting clothes
- No shirts with low necklines or that show midriff
- No short dresses, skirts or shorts

ONE-TO-ONE INTERACTIONS WITH STUDENTS

Meeting the emotional or spiritual needs of students may occasionally involve interaction on an individual basis. Please observe the following guidelines when interacting with minors:

The Two Adult Rule should be diligently followed during ministry programs: do not interact *alone* with an individual youth in any room or building.

In the event you find yourself alone with a single student, move to a room or area occupied by others, or to a location easily observed by others.

One-to-one meetings with an individual youth must occur at a time when others are present and where interactions can be easily observed. *Example:* If a youth desires additional conversation after regular programming has concluded, move to an adjoining room where other staff members or volunteers are present, or into a public space.

If a closed-door meeting must occur, it should occur on church property, with a second adult present. The door must remain unlocked, and any window treatments *open*.

Never hold a one-to-one meeting with a youth who is the opposite gender.

Any ongoing meetings with students (such as counseling, one-to-one discipleship, etc.) should be discussed with the lead or associate pastor, and should comply with the Two Adult Rule OR occur in a public, easily observed location.

Staff members and adult volunteer leaders may not date (or have *any* sort of romantic interaction with) students in the youth ministry.

SEXUALLY ORIENTED CONVERSATIONS

Staff members and volunteers are prohibited from engaging in any sexually oriented conversations with students and are not permitted to discuss any inappropriate or explicit information about their own personal relationships, dating or sexual activities with any youth in the program.

However, it is expected that from time to time youth ministry discussions and lessons may address issues related to purity, dating, sex and human sexuality. These lessons will convey to the students the church's views on these topics.

Students may have questions/struggles in this area and desire to confide in a trusted adult leader for guidance. Proceed with great caution, teach with sensitivity and from a biblical perspective.

- Avoid discussing anything of a sexual nature with students of the opposite gender.
- If a student's questions or comments on a sexual matter become too detailed or explicit in a group setting, the leader should use discretion and set up another time to meet with this student. For any follow up meeting: inform a youth ministry staff member *first*, comply with the Two Adult Rule OR meet in a public, easily observed location.
- When in doubt as to whether a conversation could be interpreted as a "sexually oriented conversation," treat the conversation as such and follow this policy.

When possible, clarify the question/topic with a youth ministry Staff Member.

SEXUALLY ORIENTED MATERIALS

Sexually oriented materials (images or videos) are prohibited on church property or in the presence of students participating in any ministry program.

PHYSICAL INTERACTION / APPROPRIATE DISPLAYS OF AFFECTIONS

Appropriate touch is needed and encouraged, but it is vital that staff members and volunteer leaders do not blur or cross the lines. In light of this, the following guidelines should be observed:

- Physical contact in any form should be above reproach, for the benefit of the student, and never based upon *your* emotional needs.
- Your personal behavior must foster trust at all times.
- Pat a hand, shoulder or back in an encouraging manner.
- Side hugs: in public view and kept brief. When hugging someone of the opposite gender, hugs should be limited to side-hugs.
- Look for opportunities to give plenty of “high fives” and “fist bumps”, unless this makes a youth feel uncomfortable.
- Shake hands, or put an arm around the student’s shoulder, briefly.

AVOID the following interactions:

- A sexual relationship with a youth is never acceptable.
- Never touch a youth in sensitive areas (breasts, buttocks, genitals) even if a youth has been injured in one of these areas. Never allow casual contact in these areas, under or over clothing.
- No sitting on laps.
- No hand-holding, unless part of a worship/prayer service or a group game.
- Never touch in anger or disgust.
- Never touch in a manner that may be construed as sexually suggestive.
- Avoid touching a youth between the navel and the knees.
- Never carry a youth piggy-back, or on your shoulders.
- Never kiss a student, or give (or receive) a massage.
- Never place hands beneath a student's clothing to play, rub, or comfort.
- Never tickle, participate in 'horse-play' or wrestle with a student.

Do not force physical contact, touch, or affection on a reluctant student, except in cases of necessary restraint for the protection of the child or others.

A student's preference *not* to be touched must be respected.

Physical contact and affection should be given only in observable places or when in the presence of others. It is much less likely that touch will be misinterpreted when physical contact is open to observation.

VERBAL INTERACTION

Verbal interaction with students should be positive and uplifting. All verbal interaction should be encouraging, constructive, and mindful of our mission of aiding parents in the spiritual growth and development of students.

To this end, do not talk to students in a way that is or could be construed as harsh, threatening, intimidating, shaming, derogatory, demeaning, or humiliating. Do not swear in the presence of students.

In general, verbal interaction should occur in a location where others may observe what is happening. At no time should a youth and adult disappear behind a closed door, or interact in an area which cannot be seen by others.

ELECTRONIC COMMUNICATION

All communication with students must be above reproach and indicative of healthy boundaries. As with any communication, the content of any electronic communication should be readily available to share with the youth ministry leader or a parent.

TEXTING

Texting between ministry leaders and students is permissible only as outlined below. In general, texts should occur in 'group' form, whenever possible. Though students will often reply individually, make effort to text in group form and encourage replies to the group. **When possible, ministry leaders should send and receive texts using a ministry-provided device/account.**

Prudent judgment must be used in the timing and content of texts. **Do not text before 7am or after 10pm** unless the texting occurs as part of a programmed ministry activity. Do not share photos and/or videos of a sexual or suggestive nature.

Avoid discussion of ANY sexual topic via texts.

Do not post inappropriate or off-color content, or comment on inappropriate or off-color posts. When in doubt, treat a post as inappropriate.

No individual messaging through social media or texting may occur with a youth of the opposite gender.

COMMUNICATION APPLICATIONS

It is permissible for the ministry to use applications that have messaging features (i.e., Instagram, Facebook Messenger) – a ministry account. At least one other ministry leader must have credentials to access the application and regularly review the messaging, comments and postings.

It is not permissible for ministry leaders to use personal accounts to direct message students. All group and direct messaging to/from students should be above reproach, available for supervisory access and originate from a ministry account – not a personal account.

In the event a youth direct messages a ministry leader's personal account, the ministry leader will transfer the thread to the ministry account for reply, if necessary. All students will be counseled to direct communication to the ministry account.

Avoid discussion of ANY sexual topic via social media.

Do not comment or reply to a student's post that is inappropriate or questionable. All interaction should be above reproach and reflect the integrity and values of The Gathering Church youth ministry.

No individual social media or texting communication may occur with a youth of the opposite gender.

The use of Snapchat (or other similar applications) with students is not permitted.
The use of Houseparty (or other similar applications) with students is not permitted.

Applications that allow anonymous messaging are not permissible.

'HOOK-UP' APPLICATIONS

Though the use of relationship applications are commonplace and acceptable, Ministry leaders are prohibited from participating in Meet & Date or Meet & Chat applications (those applications intended to facilitate sexual encounters).

PERSONAL SOCIAL MEDIA

As a ministry leader, maintain a high moral standard in your social media presence. Inappropriate social media content may be a basis for suspension from participation in youth ministry at The Gathering Church. Please be cautious about the content of the posts on your personal social media. Please ensure that photos or videos posted on social media reflect The Gathering Church ministry guidelines related to alcohol, tobacco and modesty (dress, posture and content).

TRANSPORTATION

Staff members and volunteers may from time to time be in a position to provide transportation for students. The following guidelines should be strictly observed when ministry workers are involved in the transportation of students:

- Students should be transported directly to their destination. Unauthorized stops to a non-public place must be avoided.
- Avoid transportation circumstances that leave only *one youth* in transport.
- Avoid physical contact with students while in vehicles.
- Absent an emergency, **cell phones may not be used by drivers** while transporting minors (other than navigation applications for directions). In an emergency, stop the vehicle to use the cell phone, unless a stop cannot safely occur. Texting or other cell phone use is strictly prohibited while driving.
- No drivers under age 25 may drive The Gathering Church owned or rented vehicles.
- In transportation, the TWO ADULT RULE or 'RULE OF 3' must be followed.
- Avoid transporting a single student.
- Never be alone in a vehicle with a youth of the opposite sex.
- Never instruct a youth to drive other students to a ministry event.
- Transport only the number of students for whom you have seatbelts.
- Seatbelts should be worn at all times while in the vehicle.
- No one should be double-buckled.
- Use extra caution when driving students.

OUT-OF-PROGRAM CONTACT WITH STUDENTS

The Gathering Church safety standards established to protect students and ensure healthy relationships should be respected *outside* ministry programs as well. In addition to ministry safety standards, the following policies should be respected in all interactions with students occurring *outside* ministry programs.

- Never be alone with a minor in an unobserved context or location.
- Limit connections by gender. Do not initiate or maintain contact with students of the opposite gender.
- Any dating or sexual relationship of any kind with a minor is strictly prohibited.
- **Never** spend the night at a student's home or invite a youth to spend the night at your home.
- Do not spend the night in an 'away' location with any youth (vacation, etc.).

PLANNING EVENTS FOR GROUPS

When planning a group event outside of regular programming, volunteer leaders should keep parents and staff members informed of details and abide by The Gathering Church policies. Some events may require a release form.

OVERNIGHT EVENTS

Some youth ministry activities/events require overnight sleeping arrangements for students, staff members and volunteers (i.e. camp, mission trips, etc.). All programmed overnights must be approved by a ministry supervisor and receive permission from parents. No overnights are allowed on The Gathering Church property unless part of a ministry-sponsored event. No overnight between any church staff member or volunteer and an *unrelated* minor may occur in any context. If pre-existing family relationships exist wherein overnights may occur between 'family friends', these relationships must be communicated to a ministry supervisor.

For each overnight event, youth ministry staff must create a child safety plan that will supplement this policy document to provide specific child protection steps unique to the event (activity, travel, location, other groups present).

MEDICATION

Do not administer medication of any kind to any youth while serving in ministry programs, including 'over the counter' drugs. For certain trips or activities (i.e., mission trips, beach/ski retreats), The Gathering Church will bring a medical professional that will dispense appropriate medications consistent with other policies and signed parent permission forms.

POLICIES AND PROCEDURES STATEMENT OF ACKNOWLEDGMENT AND AGREEMENT

This page is to be signed, detached, and delivered to the Ministry Supervisor.

Staff members and volunteer leaders are required to read and understand this youth safety policy. Additionally, each staff member and volunteer leader must execute an acknowledgment form that this policy has been read, understood, and will be followed. Staff members and volunteer leaders who fail to adhere to this policy may be asked to step down from their role.

I have received and read a copy of The Gathering Church youth ministry Policies and Procedures on the date listed below, and I understand the importance of the matters set forth herein. I understand and agree to abide by these policies during my service at The Gathering Church.

I understand that these policies may be modified or eliminated at any time by The Gathering Church.

While, ideally, I will serve in this ministry for the agreed term, I understand that I may choose to end this relationship at any time. If possible, I will provide two weeks' notice to my supervisor.

I further acknowledge and understand that the materials and guidelines contained in this manual in no way express or imply a contractual employment relationship between The Gathering Church and me. If I am applying as a volunteer, I acknowledge and agree that I will receive no compensation for hours worked.

Finally, I understand that it is my responsibility to review new guidelines that are created and distributed.

Staff member or volunteer's name (please print)

Staff member or volunteer's signature

Date